Supreme Court Justice
William O. Douglas
Whitman '20
Oxford Cup Roll No. 71

Dedicated. Resilient. Staunch. Three words that describe Douglas and his tenure as the longest-serving justice in the history of the United States Supreme Court – 36 years and 209 days. Further, throughout his service, he gave the most speeches, wrote the most opinions and dissents and authored the most books among past and present justices. In an issue of the 1975 TIME magazine, an article described Douglas as "the most doctrinaire and committed civil libertarian ever to sit on the court."

Douglas was born on October 16, 1898. Working odd jobs as a young lad and mercilessly studying in high school, Douglas earned a scholarship to Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash., where he joined the Gamma Zeta Chapter of Beta Theta Pi. Initiated on March 31, 1917, he became roll number 67 of the young Chapter that had just been founded one year earlier (1916.) There, Douglas served as the student body president and participated on the debate team. After graduating, Douglas decided to move to New York to enroll in Columbia's Law School. His Fraternity membership proved invaluable. He stayed with Beta brothers in New York and borrowed $75 from a Whitman brother to begin law school. Douglas finished law school in 1925 and married Mildred Riddle shortly thereafter.

Douglas joined the faculty at Columbia Law School and eventually Yale Law School, where he became an expert on commercial litigation and bankruptcy. He moved on from Yale in 1934 to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) through his appointment by his personal friend and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1939, after Justice Louis D. Brandeis' resignation, President Roosevelt nominated Douglas to the Supreme Court. After the U.S. Senate's vote of approval (62 to 4), Douglas was sworn into office on April 17, 1939 at the age of 40 – making him one of the youngest justices ever confirmed to the Court.

Douglas' son, William O. Douglas, Jr., Whitman '56, was initiated into the Gamma Zeta Chapter as roll number 644 on October 1, 1952. Douglas retired from office on November 12, 1975 and passed away on January 19, 1980.